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Discerning women's discursive frames in CyberKashmir[†]

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This article challenges the notion that Kashmiri women are just silent observers/victims of an ongoing conflict and militarisation of Jammu and Kashmir. Women have utilised and impacted terrestrial public spaces, but there has been an impasse to creating a viable women's movement in the state. This analysis of digital discourses about and by Kashmiri women between 2010 and 2012 shows a discernible presence of women's discursive highways which serve to manoeuvre through the clamour of competing Indian, Pakistani and Kashmiri nationalisms. Kashmiri women can be heard, they are speaking out, and this article examines their discursive landscapes and what role, if any, Islamic discourses have in CyberKashmir.

Keywords: women; Islam; feminism; Kashmir; online discourse

Introduction

The aim of this work is to examine women's writings and the role Islamic discourses play within them in what is termed the digital borderlands of CyberKashmir. This is highly relevant as Muslim women's role in conflict-ridden Kashmir is often labelled as passive or framed in ideological and/or binary categories. Here what is actually being articulated in the written discourses of Kashmiri women is examined. This review and analysis is set in two parts and concerns, firstly, an overview of the state of Jammu and Kashmir (hereafter J&K), the role of Islamic discourses there, a gendered view of the conflict and an exploration of the terrestrial agendas of Kashmiri women's groups. In the second section of this article, an examination is undertaken of Indian and Kashmiri mediascapes, the creation of CyberKashmir as a virtual space, the methodology applied to the sample and, finally, an analysis of women's online discourses and whether they prioritise Islamic frames.

An insight into J&K

In 1947, J&K's 'accession' to the Indian union occurred under circumstances that are still contested today by rival versions of history. It is not within the remit of this article to look into the origins of the dispute, which has been the subject of research conducted by many scholars from varying perspectives (see Lamb 1992; Ganguly 1997; Bose 2003; Jha 2003; Schofield 2003; Zutshi 2004; Behera 2006). J&K has survived war in 1947–1948, 1965, a

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proxy war in 1971, a nuclear showdown in 1999 and the ongoing low-intensity conflict, which commenced in 1990 (Bose 2003, 154–155).

Indian Administered J&K is the northern most state in the Indian Union with three regions Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. According to the 2011 Census report, J&K has a population of 12,548,926; 73% of which lives in rural areas. The average family size is 5.7 members and the literacy rates have gone up in the past 10 years to 68.7%, an increase of 13.2% from previous census figures. The 2011 Census also reveals a disturbingly skewed sex ratio of 883 females:1000 males, which has decreased since 2001. Furthermore, as media access is an important aspect of the framing processes, which are examined here, it is interesting to note that only 51% households own a television (Sazawal 2011). Access to Facebook is limited to 40,000 (Hussain 2010).

The importance of Islam in J&K

In this article, the position taken is that neither secularism nor Islamism is free from dogmatic or monolithic interpretations; it is therefore important that Kashmiri perspectives on the importance and role of Islam in the region are foregrounded. Yoginder Sikand is the most prolific Indian writer to have written on the importance of Islam in J&K (Sikand 2001; Sikand 2006; Sikand 2008), and Rekha Chowdhary has also highlighted the importance of religion as well as caste, ethnicity and gender as categories for identity formation in J&K (Chowdhary 2010). However, Kashmiri women's perspectives on the relevance of religion have not been foregrounded, with the exception of those of Asiya Andrabi of the women's organisation Dukhtaran e Millat (DeM) (Daughters of the Nation) and Anjum Zamrooda Habib of Muslim Khawateen Markaz (MKM - Muslim Women's Organisation).

Discussing religion in a conflict zone like J&K is prone to difficulties, as in the rest of India the spectre of 'communal' violence hangs over all contentions between different communities. In J&K, it has particular connotations for those who aspire to one type of nationalism or another, whether religiously or ethnically espoused, or indeed both simultaneously. The opponents of Kashmiri nationalism suggest that religion/Islam has played a primary and significant role in the politics of J&K for at least the last 100 years, and Kashmiri nationalists maintain that theirs has been a secular peasant struggle thwarted by the centre in India and is not an Islamist movement.

The inability to address more than two versions of Islam and Muslims in the post-9/11 world has led to imagined Fifth Columnists lurking within Muslim minorities in secular states the world over. It is these images constructed through film, print media, TV and academic discourse which serve to construct Muslims and Islam in many countries with Muslim minorities, and India is not an exception. Recently digital media have proven to be of great relevance for social and political movement formation in Muslim majority spaces. These developments resulting from greater access to technology have proved to be instrumental with regard to new movement formations in the Muslim world. This was evidenced in 2009 with the Iranian 'Green Revolution' and more recently the 'Arab Spring' (Schneider and Gräf 2011, 9–26). In 'Who speaks for Islam: What a billion Muslims really think', Esposito suggests that the media is pivotal in the construction and dissemination of the image of the oppressed Muslim woman in need of rescue. This representation 'is reinforced by the Western press, which portrays Muslim women as silent, submissive, and relegated to the domestic sphere, while men monopolise the active roles' (Esposito and Mogahed 2008, 101).

In the last five years, at least, there has been a surge in writing from Kashmiri women themselves, both in the traditional literary formats and in online discourses. Therefore, whether or not Kashmiri women utilise religious frames to write about their own agendas is a valid question when examining women's discourses in J&K, where Muslims constitute a majority of the population.

Women and conflict

A gendered perspective on conflict is provided by scholars such as Cynthia Enloe, who observed that 'Women need to be made visible in order to understand how and why international power takes the forms it does' (Enloe 1990, 198). Cynthia Cockburn argues that the utilisation of feminist analysis enables us to perceive 'violence as a continuum–from domestic violence (in and near the home) to military violence (patrolling the external boundaries against enemies) and state violence (policing against traitors within)' (Cockburn 2007, 44–45). This perspective is evident in the formulation of the analyses of gendered effects of militarisation and the recovery of women's subjective experiences undertaken by Butalia (2002), Suri (2006), Chenoy (2007), Shekhawat (2006), Manchanda (2008), Kazi (2009), Bhasin Jamwal (2010), Ali Khan (2010) and Rashid (2011) in the context of J&K. Women's human rights discourses have been hijacked by nationalisms, rendering them a tool for portraying women as perpetual victims. The subject of rape as a war crime and women's subjective experiences of it can be found in primary sources emanating from J&K and from international organisations (Human Rights Watch 1993; Independent Women's Initiative for Justice 2009).

Although there are great obstacles to women's mobilisation in J&K, the following can be ascertained:

(1) Conflict causes the breakdown of male-dominated public spaces by blurring the divide between it and the private sphere. Thereby women are able to utilise what Manchanda calls their 'traditional invisibility in the public sphere' in order to create spaces for their activism.
(2) Access to terrestrial networking opportunities and the promotion of women's agendas are severely restricted, but this does not prevent all women from accessing public spaces as is evident in J&K.
(3) In J&K, it is believed that secular spaces are limited by the increasing of the religious public domain, further limiting women's articulations (Interview David Devadas 2011). However, it is evident that both secular and religious frames are being utilised for promoting women's agendas.
(4) Kashmiri women need to be brought into conflict transformation and peace-building processes in order to have any say in a future Kashmir.

Peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction have to be concerned with not just an end to war, but ought to engage in active nation-building processes in order to acknowledge women's contributions to the struggle for peace, to promote gender equality and to protect women. Support for the rule of law, multi-party systems and elections have become the benchmarks of peace-building, without which women cannot live in safety (Rehn and Johnson 2002, 80).

Kaul wrote of the process with familiar Kashmiri resignation 'a prinked cage is still a cage' (2010, 11). The strategies utilised so far in order to 'restore normalcy' in J&K have not been successful and this was starkly evident in the summer of 2010. Known to some

as the second Kashmiri intifada, 2010 has changed the perception of the movement for self-determination around the world and within India too. Internet technologies such as social networking media (Facebook) have already enabled the dissemination of information about Kashmir and by Kashmiris through CyberKashmir. There is also a discernible change in the reporting of news from Kashmir by some in the Indian press. Sumona DasGupta in 'Pacification is not peacebuilding' highlights the failure of the 'national elite's' twofold strategy of persuasion and coercion. She cites *The Hindu* from 22 September 2010: 'No economic packages and cosmetic administrative measures can be a substitute for demilitarization and a life based on political justice and the rule of law' (DasGupta 2012, 21).

Kashmiri women's terrestrial activism

There are different women-led groups that are active in J&K despite the many obstacles and threats to their lives and families due to the 24-year ongoing low-intensity conflict and the militarization of the state by Indian Security Forces and Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs). Here women's groups and their agendas are discussed, but this analysis is restricted to women's groups which either have an online presence or are frequently referred to by online writers.

Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons

Parveena Ahangar's son Javaid Ahangar was 'disappeared' by Indian security forces in 1993 and a year later she was forced out of her traditional familial role and into human rights activism. Together with lawyer and human rights activist Parvez Imroz, she set up the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) to provide assistance to other families in the same predicament. She has been threatened, there have been attempts to bribe her and, in 1998, a fellow member of APDP called Halima was murdered along with her son by masked gunmen. No one has been charged for this crime, nor for the 8–10,000 enforced disappearances claimed by the organisation.

Parveena Ahangar has matured politically since the beginning of her search and has refused to be co-opted by the political agendas of others. She and the APDP have also worked tirelessly to uncover evidence of unmarked and mass graves in Kashmir and militancy affected areas of Jammu (People's Tribunal 2009). Her's is the only grass-roots organisation in the selection and enjoys widespread respect from many contributors to CyberKashmir. APDP members meet every month, and hold sit-ins, carrying photos and wearing headbands with the names of their disappeared loved ones, sometimes singing poetic Islamic eulogies such as the Yusufnama. 'Joseph's story' is the lamentation of Yacub (Old Testament Jacob) for the disappearance of his favoured son, sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. This is an important instrumentalisation of Islamic eulogy, utilised in a public space to provide both an emotional context for members and an informative performance for a broader audience.

Of the organisation Ather Zia writes:

> Maternal surveillance may look simple, because it is instinctive, reflexive and biological. On the surface this process might be misread as a simple mother searching for her son. But it is a deeply political quest, which requires rigor, passion, strategy, motivation, initiative and a sense of brave invincibility against extreme threats to life under the coercive laws (remember Halima and her son); values which were amply present in Mughli and continue to fuel the mothers of the disappeared in Kashmir. (2010, 5)

Kashmiri film maker, Iffat Fatima's documentary 'Where have you hidden my new crescent moon?' (2009) records Mughli Massi's unceasing struggle to find her son (2009).

Muslim Khawateen Markaz

Anjum Zamrooda Habib started this group with others as social workers in 1986 in response to dowry deaths in Kashmir. After the Gaunkadal massacre in 1990, when security forces killed 60 peaceful demonstrators, they joined the movement for *Azadi* (freedom) and became a separatist women's organisation. Although a founding member of the Hurriyat Conference, Anjum Habib refuted any suggestion that MKM was communal in nature, and the manner in which she articulated herself was of a seasoned politician with a more secular-leaning rather than an Islamist perspective (Interview A.Z. Habib 2011). She did not comment on her betrayal by the Hurriyat leadership and why she remained committed to it after serving her jail sentence. She spoke to this researcher of the lack of unity and alliance building among women's groups, and highlighted the situation for women's mobilisation in J&K in the following way:

- NGOs (women's groups) do not reach the grass-roots level because of a lack of trust in/between the women who run them.
- There is no connectivity between women's NGOs/Groups in Kashmir and those in Jammu and Ladakh.
- Networking tools such as new media are restricted by cost and censorship.
- Training women for leadership roles is missing.
- Funding restrictions apply on NGO agendas (Interview Anjum Zamrooda Habib 2011).

Dukhtaran e Millat

Asiya Andrabi founded Dukhtaran e Millat (DeM) in 1987 as a social organisation to provide education for girls and assure equal rights to women in the frame of observant Islam. At times they have campaigned for the right to have segregated buses, eliminate dowry and protest against moral degeneration of society, including against politicians who have been found organising, profiteering from and patronizing prostitution rackets.

The DeM do not see women's role as limited to the home and insist that women should take up careers as professionals as long as they follow the tenets of Islam: 'the ideology of the organisation is a strange mixture of feminism and fundamentalism' (Butalia 2002, 61). Asiya Andrabi has insisted that she is an Islamic feminist and was the only woman in this selection who did so. 'If I had a daughter, instead, I'd like to see her become Prime minister. Men are meant for war, women for managing the world' (Marino 2010). Today they are known as a 'soft terrorist outfit' – using extralegal means including threats to impose their doctrines. According to Nyla Ali Khan:

> the discourse propounded by Asiya Andrabi does not give the marginalised, does not give the oppressed, does not give the educated few, who are trying to make a foray into the world, much to look forward to and does not allow them to envision the creation of spaces in which they would be able to function with some kind of agency with some kind of empowerment so I think her ideology is more or less marginalised. (Interview Nyla Ali Khan 2010)

Although marginalised in terrestrial politics, Asiya Andrabi and DeM have a presence on the Internet and social media (Facebook) and are adept at promoting regressive

understandings of Islam in the Urdu language and discursively pertinent sound bites in English. As such they seem to have more reach and desire to access a younger audience with their agenda than the other groups mentioned here.

Athwaas

Founded by Ashma Kaul Bhatia, Athwaas was borne out of a Delhi round table in 2001. It brought together women from different religions and political and ideological backgrounds. Over the years, it expanded to include women from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds belonging to the region of J&K. Athwaas has suffered from an initial trust deficit, compounded by its 'outside the Valley' status, which persists to this day. However, it seems to be the only organisation dedicated to creating alliances for peace-building across the divides; it provides

> an example at the macro level for all the three regions of Jammu and Kashmir, for different ethnic groups, political formations the possibilities to reorganize the polity in a way that accommodates the aspirations and vision of all regions, groups, minorities and sub-minorities in a non-violent way. (Kaul-Bhatia 2010)

Ezabir Ali runs Athwaas' rural *samanbals* (workshops) in order to promote health care and provide para-health care training for young women to work in their communities. In doing so, she helps young women to provide essential but usually inaccessible health care to some of the neediest women in the state. In turn, these young women are able to earn an income which they use not only to help their families but also to be able to afford to get married (Von der Haide 2006).

Behboodi Khawateen Markaz

Madre Mehrban (Benevolent Mother) of Kashmir, Begum Akbar Jehan, founded Behboodi Khawateen Markaz (BKM) in 1975. Although the longest formally established organisation, its work seems to be on the margins as far as the frequency with which writers in online spaces refer to women/women's groups. The connection to the National Conference party may be one of the reasons for this exclusion.

The organisation's mission is to provide intensive training in arts and crafts to facilitate women's employment in the handicrafts sector and to provide homes for destitute women. It also has a hostel for young Gujjar girls which enables them to get an education, which was and still is a major problem with scheduled tribes such as the Gujjars, for whom 60-plus years of development has meant little. Today Suraiya Ali, daughter of Sheikh Abdullah and Begum Akbar Jehan, runs the centre, where she also works for women's welfare, to improve their health, and encourage and educate women about the benefits of immunization. The organisation also provides literacy classes and has started a micro-credit programme and training in small business management with which women can manage their own cottage industries (Interview Suraiya Abdullah Ali 2010).

Human Effort for Love and Peace Foundation and the Women Against Violence

Nighat Shafi Pandit is the founder of two organisations which work on the issues of social reform within J&K, including violent crimes in general and domestic/familial violence in particular. They are campaigning for the introduction of moral education into school and

college curricula in the state, which it is felt would combat the acceptability of violence in J&K. 'Nighat Shafi Pandit has done a lot of work in the last 10–12 years with orphanages and vocational centres for women' (Interview Nyla Ali Khan 2010). She is also someone whose name does not appear frequently outside of Kashmirforum.org, where her work is duly acknowledged.

Pattan Engineering college

Dilafroz Qazi is the principal of an engineering college in Pattan and runs several primary schools where many orphans of the conflict receive free education. She is engaged in a number of philanthropic activities, which include the promotion of literacy among rural communities and lending support to rape victims of the Kashmir conflict. She is responsible for establishing a dairy farm for the Kunan Pushpora rape victims and provided cows for them in order to assist them in making an independent living.

Summary

Although there is a lack of unity and cohesion among the women, it is also evident that there are connectivities between them because of the region in which they work and the issues upon which they base their activism. Most of the groups are secular in nature and do not use Islamic frameworks to advance their agendas, with the obvious exception of DeM. Although APDP use Islamic frames in a performative way, these are in themselves not related to the organisational aims, and MKM certainly have used Islamic frames in the past but consider theirs a non-communal group.

The APDP, DeM and MKM are politically orientated groups existing in hostile public space. Parveena Ahangar has been threatened and harassed for the work she continues to do and both Asiya Andrabi and Anjum Habib have spent time imprisoned for their activities (see Habib 2011). Athwaas is the group which stands alone in seeking to bridge discursive divides between women, and the Human Effort for Love and Peace, Women Against Violence, BKM and Dilafroz Qazi are orientated to the non-political social sphere and do not utilise religious frameworks in their agendas. It is the political milieu of the region which seems to be a divisive factor, and women's inability or unwillingness to transcend this even when their activism is framed as 'apolitical' or secular.

For strategizing among women to be more effective, feminists may need to distance themselves from national governments/nationalist ideologies as well as regressive religious organisations/groups and their agendas. Perhaps it is this which would inspire the differing camps with the confidence to make moves towards alliance building.

The borderlands of CyberKashmir

J&K's borders have been the subject of bitter contestation for at least the past 67 years, and in particular since the beginning of the present conflict in 1990. Here borders are considered from another perspective 'as not merely a line but as a zone or as borderlands' where knowledge is produced and meaning is constructed. In this case women's discourses in the state of J&K are examined in digital spaces, as spaces where the framing of women's discursive terrains has freer reign than in the highly militarised terrestrial spaces of J&K. Paula Banerjee's work on borders has allowed for a gendered concept of borderlands to be created, and it is women's subjective experiences that are 'definitive of those of the vulnerable communities who are forced to pit their bodies against the border' (Bannerjee 2010, xiv–xvi).

I have chosen to use the term CyberKashmir to define the digital territory which corresponds to a discursive terrain created by Kashmiri women and men. It is in the margins of CyberKashmir that women's spaces have been created and where a rich stream of discourse can be elicited: this space where women exist is in the borderlands of CyberKashmir. In the present paper the term CyberKashmir does not refer to Ladakh or Jammu, as the researcher has not had contact with women's groups here, nor do these regions appear to have a discernible digital presence.

When their discursive terrains in CyberKashmir are examined, we find that women are involved with much more nuanced and synthesised frames of reference. Moghadam argues that Internet use among Transnational Feminist Networks (TFN) is a 'key medium' in feminist discussions, which is particularly advantageous when sensitive topics such as religion, gender and conflict are discussed. Furthermore, she insists that the Internet has enabled TFN 'to retain flexibility, adaptability and non-hierarchical features' and allowed them to avoid excessive bureaucratization of their organizations (Moghadam 2009, 87–89). This freedom from bureaucratization has meant that funding constraints on activism, in the case of J&K affecting some of the women's organisations, can be avoided, and women do not need to cater their agendas towards governmental/external aims (Interview Nyla Ali Khan 2010).

Many intellectuals and scholars in Kashmir fear the consequences of saying the wrong thing (Chenoy 2007, 176) as was evidenced, when this researcher tried to contact academics from Kashmir University for research purposes repeatedly via email and then by telephone. Only one in situ academic responded to the research request and she was from Jammu University. University professors are not only afraid for their careers, but also for their lives and their families' lives and well-being. One young woman student emphasised that 'everyone knew there were Indian agents' (Incognito security personnel) among actual students at the University of Kashmir (Interview Shabana Hussain 2012). This fact informed and formed the methodology applied to uncover women's discourses in CyberKashmir.

Methodology

A critical discourse analysis has been undertaken by researching and collating data from blogs and web portals on the Internet. This method of analysis has been chosen because it offers a clear picture of the type of discourse, its prominence and its nuances. It can help to explain the relation between content and context by revealing the socio-psychological and political characteristics of the discourse. This form of research – scanning existing data – was more successful than relying on interviews with academics.

Six web portals which separately consist of locations where Kashmiri journalists posted and blogged their work were utilised as one site (Collective Media including www.islamonline.org, www.thekashmirian.blogspot.com, www.thehoot.org, www.blogthekashmirwalla.com, www.kashmiraffairs.org, www.salon.com) in CyberKashmir.

Another five were chosen as they were either women-led portals or created by men to highlight women's concerns, problems and achievements (www.Kashmirlit.org, www.kashmiriwomen.org, www.kashmirforum.org, www.brutallyhonest1.net, www.zunagash.org).

The other web portal utilised was chosen because it is a digital space which is utilised by many Kashmiris as well as 'outside' experts, scholars, journalists and researchers and activists (www.countercurrents.org).

The process of data retrieval was made difficult by the fact that some of the web portals/blogs were inaccessible after a while of operating online. The data sample included texts

written by journalists, 'diaspora' writers, scholars, students, working and retired professionals, filmmakers and social activists, originating from the Kashmir Valley.

The web portals/blogs were chosen on the basis of whether they carried articles and entries by or about women and women's issues in Kashmir. This was done in order to highlight the discourses of mainly urban, educated Kashmiri women and men from across the generational spectrum who have chosen to take their articulations online. Since Internet access is restricted, this sample is in no way representative but rather a selective portrayal of digital discourses in CyberKashmir. Furthermore, the medium of English is utilised by contributors, which provides evidence of a selective yet strategic effort to communicate to a non-Kashmiri audience. The reasons why may be revealed in a short examination of the divergences between India-centric and Kashmir-centric mediascapes.

Indian mediascapes

Religion in J&K is often only mentioned in terms of a problematic, regressive, 'jihadist' view of Islam projected by the mainstream corporate Indian media. In this paradigm, Pakistani Islamist terrorism is the cause of the insurgency in J&K, and Indian security forces have the duty of protecting India's national sovereignty by routing foreign mercenaries, who are perceived as instigating the normally docile population of the Kashmir Valley into armed violence.

In Joseph's article (2000) 'Kashmir, human rights and the Indian press', the Indian mainstream print media came under criticism for its reporting of human rights violations in the state. She maintains that although international human rights organisations and Indian civil rights groups have documented the violations of human rights committed against people in Kashmir by Indian security forces and AOGs, this does not seem to find its way into the mass media and, therefore, the general public are not engaged:

> The Indian press has consistently projected the government's stance on Kashmir … . often has even justified the so-called few cases of security excesses, and questioned the credibility of human rights reports on Kashmir. Even the condemnation of human rights violations in Kashmir by other countries is often blocked out.

It is this inherent bias that prompts Manchanda to argue that Indian national media should resist ' … the anti-democratic militarist impulse justified by the so-called needs of national security' (2001, 320).

Kashmiri mediascapes

It is thus that a conflict paradigm is created, the effect of which is to give not only the Indian public but also the international observers a skewed picture of the reality of life and death in J&K. In fact, what is discernible from this research is that a large number of those who are articulating in CyberKashmir are print journalists frustrated by censorship and violence (Reporters without Borders 2008) who, prompted by the lack of terrestrial security, use their skills in online discursive spaces to present a very different and Kashmir-centred perspective. In comparison, just beyond Kashmir in the neighbouring region of Jammu, it seems that print journalist and executive editor of *Kashmir Times* Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal, can write very critical articles on the subject of Kashmir and the ongoing effects of conflict on its population without the same repercussions or fears.

According to Ahmad in 'Media and Politics in Kashmir' (2006), a censored and 'weakened local media and biased propagandist Indian media have defined the political realities

in the state'. Writing on the Indian-centric paradigm in Kashmir, he adds that during tourist season bunkers are moved or prettied up so as not to arouse the curiosity or fear of Indian tourists, who are sold on the idea that something called 'normalcy' exists (Ahmad 2006).

Hussain asserts in 'Silence in siege: Media realities in modern Kashmir' that it is the 'siege' of Kashmiri public spaces which has led to the silencing of journalistic voices. Hussain compares the present condition to that of 1990 when there were around 6 vernacular newspapers being published from Srinagar, whereas today there are 24 Urdu dailies, 6 English dailies, 4 local news agencies and more than 12 weeklies published from Srinagar. He complains that this has had no subsequent effect of increasing 'the volume of reportage'. Even stranger is that allegedly a majority of the 'vernacular dailies and some of the English language newspapers function without hiring even a single reporter' (Hussain 2006).

Convergent journalism in CyberKashmir

Having moved to CyberKashmir, Hussain (2010) writes in 'Facebook, YouTube used as weapons in Kashmir': 'The struggle on the streets and in the corners of cyberspace have a mutually complementary nature.' Freelance journalist Fahad Shah in 'Kashmir's e-protest' suggests that it is the conflict generation in Kashmir that is spearheading this online activism, and it even has members in a wider Kashmiri diaspora in India and further afield (Shah 2010, 1). Furthermore, one foreign journalist suggested to this researcher that protests were being stage-managed from behind the scenes by key Hurriyat leaders and Asiya Andrabi, with financial assistance from Pakistan.

During the 2010 summer protests in which more than a hundred people were killed, the majority of whom were students, there was a clampdown on the organisers and networkers who were using Facebook to organise their protests (Shah 2010, 1). Tech-savvy Kashmiris have produced professional YouTube entries uploaded from cell phones and put to music. Citizen journalism is in practise as young Kashmiris upload images from mobile phones of security personnel damaging vehicles and property during curfews. One of these collages of image and music is set to Everlast's song for Palestine, 'Stone in My Hand.' It was created by someone known only as a 'computer engineer' who has become an admired figure among protesters. 'He showed us how one can be more meaningful and imaginative and yet continue to be a stone pelter' (Hussain 2010).

Discursive terrains are being challenged as online veteran journalists write in these digital spaces they have created, and novices utilise Facebook and YouTube to tell their stories. This has come at a price for young people who can be traced through their Facebook and mobile phone accounts by police.

How women describe and challenge the media image constructed of them can be examined by exploring their own writings.

Women-led web portals/blogs – findings

In total, 11 separate web locations were examined, which came to constitute the virtual territory of CyberKashmir; of these only 5 dealt with women's concerns or issues. For the purposes of this article, three of these were chosen in order to highlight women's discourses and two were omitted because they consisted of men's discourses on women (Figure 1).

When the data analysis of each individual web portal/blog was aggregated, the main themes being framed were as follows:

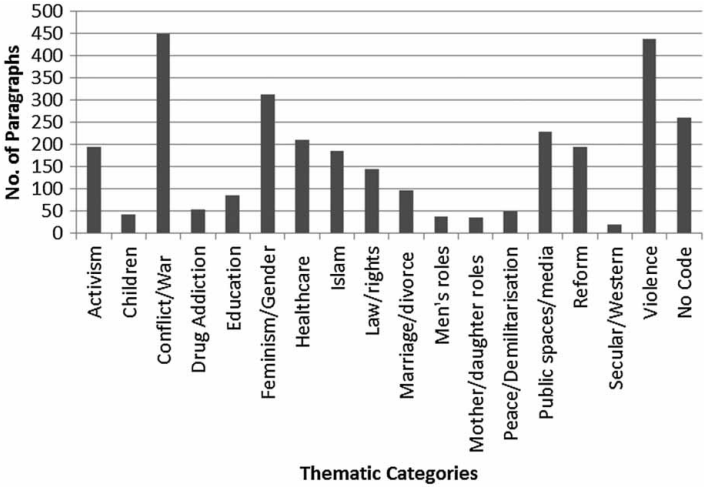

Figure 1. Aggregate value of web portals/blogs in CyberKashmir.

(1) Conflict
(2) Violence
(3) Feminism
(4) Public spaces/media
(5) Health care
(6) Activism and Reform
(7) Islam.

Here, Islam is in the seventh position as far as CyberKashmir's contributors are concerned and interestingly, feminism is in the third place. When individual results of women-led/majority portals are compared to these, one can see what priority is given to Islam (Islamic discourses) by women in their own discursive endeavours.

KashmirLit – www.kashmitlit.org

This web portal was created by journalist, writer, poet and scholar Ather Zia, who shares the concerns of other journalists in CyberKashmir about the political situation and the militarisation of the state. Women's issues are not extensively dealt with and the absence of feminism as a priority is noticeable (Figure 2).

The detailed analysis of this discursive terrain reveals that 'Violence' and 'Conflict' are hyper-conflated categories or themes. They are mainly engaged with conflict-related violence and the impacts of militarisation on people's lives, such as an article entitled 'Shopian rape case – infinite injustice, Lies, damned lies' by journalist Anuradha Basin Jamwal, who highlights the story of the rape and murder of Neelofar and Asiya Jan on 29 May 2009.

As one woman student put it, 'What really concerns me is security: we are made most insecure by those who the government have provided as security personnel' (Interview Shabana Hussain 2012).

Health care is the next largest frame, which indicates a deep concern shared across other sites in CyberKashmir about the need of urgent and radical intervention in health matters.

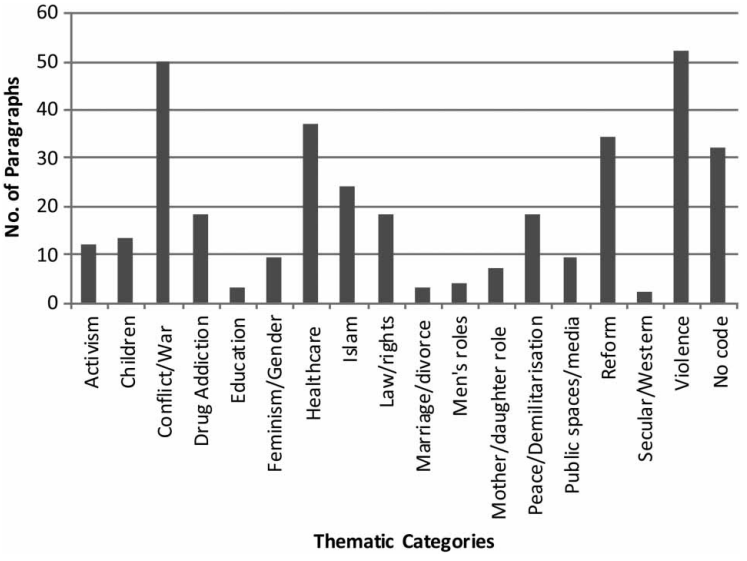

Figure 2. Kashmirlit.org.

Mental illness connected to self-experience or the experience of witnessing violence against others is the major point being emphasised. The dearth of medical staff and facilities to treat patients is evident in much of the primary literature (De Jong et al. 2008a, 2008b) and testified to by medical professionals in this portal. Saiba Varma's article is entitled 'Healing Kashmir–the emergence of psychiatry as a mode of redressal'.

Reform refers to societal transformation of how victims of exposure to militarisation and violence are dealt with. The most urgent issue in CyberKashmir is health care and the lack of capacity to treat increasing incidences of drug addiction, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among the general population. Societal reform of attitudes to these 'new' phenomena of addiction and other mental illnesses is also highlighted as desirable, so that sufferers are treated more compassionately.

Islam is the frame through which possible understandings and potential solutions can be posited, such as in trying to alleviate the suffering of half-widows, for example. This could be achieved by unifying Islamic legal understandings to prevent the injustice of women having to wait for years to be pronounced a widow and therefore to have the right to remarry. These dilemmas are highlighted in Afsana Rashid's article 'They wait endlessly to be pronounced widows.'

Kashmirforum – www.KashmirForum.org

This web portal and blog was set up by Dr Vijay K. Sazawal, who is also one of three Kashmiri men who have set up online spaces for the benefit of speaking about women's issues or for allowing women to express their concerns, which in the reduced public spaces are few and far between (Interview Vijay Sazawal 2011). The women contributors in this space provide the most detailed and clear discourses on women and women's issues to be found in CyberKashmir. Other issues in Kashmiri society are also highlighted, such as late marriages, women's successes and recognition in education, in professions, as entrepreneurs and as activists in both the Valley and nationally and internationally. Detailed and

three-dimensional stories are told where women are not just victims of violence with barely a name; this discursive terrain seeks to uncover women as fully fledged beings. Islam as a category is in the ninth position when compared to the aggregate chart.

Feminism as a frame of reference for the mostly, but not exclusively, female contributors to Kashmirforum is clearly prominent in this discursive terrain. As a frame of reference, it consists largely of discussions surrounding gender discrimination faced by Kashmiri women in their places of work, as well as in the home, and society at large. In her article 'Gender discrimination: Sexual harassment-student failed for raising voice', Waseema Masood highlights the plight of one young female student who was failed for issuing a complaint of sexual harassment by staff at her college (Figure 3).

Violence is the next largest frame and it is these analyses of gender inequalities (e.g. discrimination in the family, female foeticide, spousal violence and other familial violence from in-laws to eve-teasing, rape and murder of women) that lead this researcher to understand a concerted effort by women to analyse the nature of the violence around them. Although conflict-related violence is written about here, it is not the main focus, and authors such as Rafia Munshi write about more localised violence in her article 'Victimised by their own gender – daughter or daughters-in-law.'

Health care as a frame of reference is the topic that is highlighted by those medical professionals (and journalists) who are trying to cope with a wide range of medical crises (situations where there are not enough resources to meet an acute need) on a daily basis. As many hospitals were destroyed and facilities are still being rebuilt, the fact remains that qualified, trained staff are in short supply and many of those who are medically qualified choose to leave the state and work elsewhere. The most pressing needs would be mental health care of an increasingly traumatised population. The topic is addressed, for example, in 'Mental healthcare' by Zeenat Zeeshan Fazil.

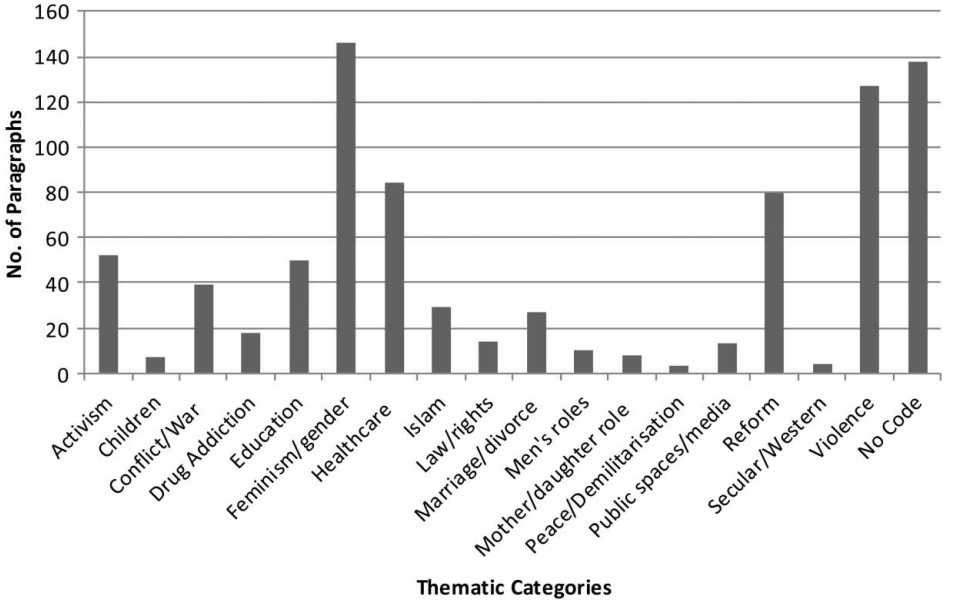

Figure 3. Kashmirforum.org.

Reform, that is urgent societal reform, is also called for in this terrain, as health issues, both mental and physical, are immediate, and have been left relatively untouched in the wider mainstream international and Indian press discourses. However, critique is directed at the state government of J&K and at Kashmiri society for discriminating against women and failing to protect and promote women's rights. Both are in need of transformation, but the focus of the writers here is on societal transformation in order to remove discrimination and violence against women and to address health-care crises facing the population of the Kashmir Valley.

Activism is the solution to the issues highlighted by the writers to this forum. It is through education that mobilisation and training of women for leadership roles and decision-making could transform society into a more gender-just model, which is described by writers.

The Conflict is a thematic category, which this discursive terrain does not give high priority to at all. In fact it is the only web portal/blog of those researched which did not show Conflict in the top five themes. 'Conflict' as a category is marked by its absence, which indicates that these women are of the Kashmiri social/ political elite; educated, worldly, confident, mature (above 30) but they are hesitant to speak openly about the conflict.

ZunaGash – www.zunagash.org

This web portal/blog was abandoned after only a few months of being created. Within the broad theme of Islam, there is a discernible discursive stream evident from the data analysis that speaks of Islamic ideas of gender justice directly. It challenges the idea that romantic love and Islam are mutually exclusive categories, and is reformative in its tilt against practices contrary to harmonious marital relations. One such article would be 'Romance in Islam' by Asma Yasrib.

Young women also wrote about the lack of public spaces for women to pray, and are critical of a society which does not prioritise Muslim women's need to pray at set prayer times. It observes that the experience of Muslims in non-Muslim spaces is often more conducive to Muslim women's prayer obligations. The women contributors to this portal are young, probably still in their twenties and unmarried and some of them have experience of residing in or visiting non-Muslim countries (Figure 4).

As for a more detailed look at this discursive terrain, it can be ascertained that it is younger, single women (and a few men) who are writing in this arena. Originally, the category was marriage/divorce, but due to the nature of this site, it was changed to marriage/relationships, which is a more accurate description. A reason for the dominant thematic frame of marriage/relationship is that marriage is a major social problem in the state of J&K, due to the dearth of eligible partners, increases in the numbers of those never married, and exorbitant increases in dowry costs. The state has an estimated 897,289 people in the 'never married' category, which is higher than the national average (Malik 2010). As marriage is the only Islamic/sanctioned relationship mentioned in this discursive terrain, it is highly significant and Islam providing a possible solution to the problem is posited.

Islam is the next frame and this follows from the issue of marriage described earlier, which is a preoccupation for most young women and men in their mid-20s who are educated and do not want to be left unmarried. This is also borne out in interviews with young women students, one of whom suggested that dowry costs were to blame for increasing violence against women in Kashmiri society (Interview Saima Bano 2011). The

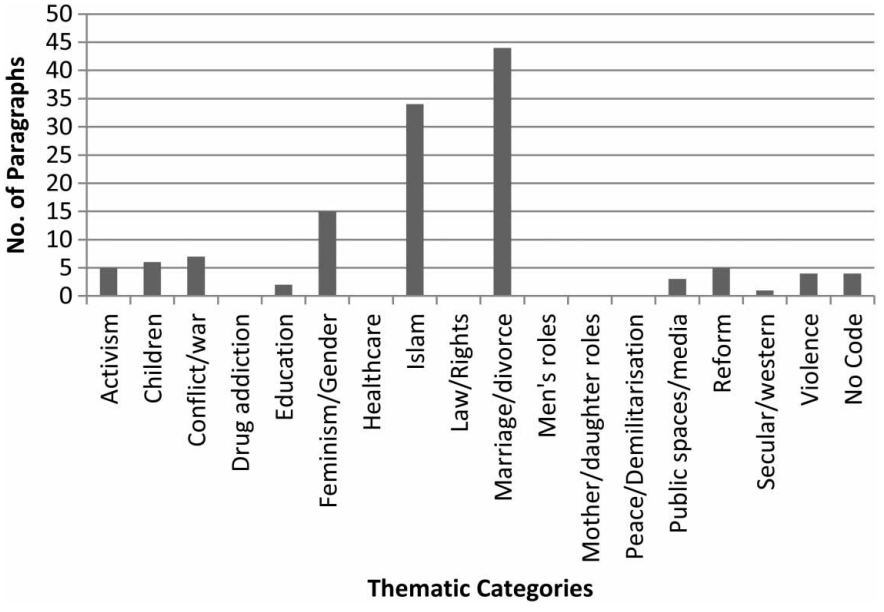

Figure 4. Zunagash.org.

Humsafar Marriage Counselling Cell was set up in 2005 by the Islamic Dawah Centre in response to public clamour for something to be done. Set up as an 'austere' marriage bureau which seeks to match prospective clients with suitable partners, it seeks to help in the marriage of those who are otherwise too poor to afford it, or educated clients who cannot find the right partner (Sikander 2011).

On the surface this would seem to be a reformative and welcome relief for people of J&K, but some questions arose, such as who is conducting these marriages? It seems that the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) have an executive working at Humsafar. It would be pertinent to discover if the AIMPLB standardised Nikanama (Islamic marriage contract) is used, or can couples and their families write or prepare their own? If young prospective couples are advised about their rights and duties in their 'counselling' sessions, then what specifically is the nature of such advice to young women? Why can the couples not meet on their own to talk to each other without the presence of parents? (Interview Mushtaq Sikander 2011).

Feminism here takes upon the hue of Islamic feminism, as prominent scholars in the field are paraphrased, and *Ahadith* (Prophetic sayings) are quoted and utilised, as are stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. This feminism is reformative and speaks of gender justice from within an Islamic framework, referencing both feminist works and issues dominant in Muslim diaspora communities, such as Shaima Qureshi's article 'Pray or delay', addressing women's access to mosques.

Reform or societal transformation is necessary in order to accommodate the religious obligations of women in public, at work and in the mosque. A future is being envisaged by these young women where Kashmiri society would be more just to them and others, a future shaped by the Islamic emphasis on social justice, and in particular ensuring women their Islamic rights.

Conflict/war is limited to the violent effects it has had on women and children in the state. These entries focus on the stories of orphans and widows such as 'The pain of

Dardpora' by Rehana, of drug abuse and unplanned pregnancies as consequences of conflict, and the ensuing moral decay of Kashmiri society as a result of militarisation.

Conclusions

The militarisation of the state has led to violence not only on the macro level for women at the hands of Indian security forces and AOGs, but also on a localized societal level where violence against women is increasing. This violence is something that Kashmiri women are making efforts to combat by engaging in discourse and analysing problems, sometimes using clearly feminist analyses, and campaigning to show that it is women's activism which is specifically required in order to create a more gender-just society.

What is evident from the framing discernible in the borderlands of CyberKashmir is that a conscious and strategic effort to create shared understanding is being undertaken by women. It became clear in women's online discourses that conflict, violence against women and health-care crises are the main issues. Islam as a category does not take a prominent position in CyberKashmir as a whole, or in women's discourses generally. However, there are a minority of young Kashmiri women who are prioritising Islam as a framework for providing gender justice and societal reform.

Kashmiri women have carved themselves a space in CyberKashmir, and are now producing online discourses and literature in virtual and terrestrial spaces to tell Kashmiri stories in Kashmiri voices to an English-speaking audience outside of their valley.

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Skype interviews

Interview with Prof. Nyla Ali Khan (Academic expert) 3 May 2010.
Interview with Suraiya Abdullah Ali (Social activist) 8 July 2010.
Interview with Vijay K. Sazawal (Retired professional/blogger) 28 August 2011.
Interview with Mushtaq ul Haq Ahmed Sikander (Scholar/activist/blogger) 4 September 2011.
Interview with Anjum Zamrooda Habib (MKM leader/activist) 1 October 2011.
Interview with Saima Bano (Student name changed) 9 December 2011.
Interview with Shabana Hussain (Student name changed) 4 January 2012.
Interview with Prof. Rekha Chowdhury (Academic expert) 15 January 2012.
Interview with Ather Zia (Journalist/scholar/blogger) 27 January 2012.

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